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ABSTRACT

Learning, motivational, creative, and leadership characteristics of very able pupils are listed prior to a discussion of aspects of programs available for gifted children in Australia, where the education of the gifted has not developed as an area of specialization within education. Early in the discussion, specific attention is given to research concerning gifted education. Because gifted children whose talents remain unrecognized may become underachievers, characteristics of underachieving children are listed. Also listed are types of school provision for the gifted child, whether within or outside the school and the school day. The paper concludes with a summation of educational provisions for the gifted in the Australian context and suggests directions for program development. (RH)

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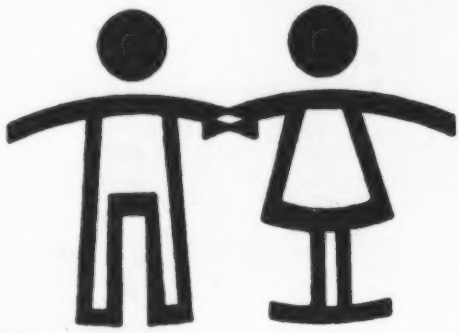

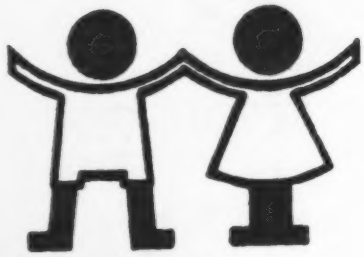

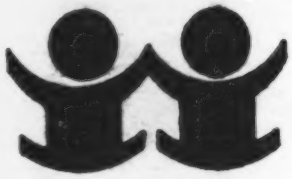

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ON BEING A GIFTED CHILD

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ON BEING A GIFTED CHILD

Dr Yvonne Larsson

To define the word "gifted" is difficult because like all abstractions there is uncertainty in producing a concise and correct definition. Extraordinary achievements, whether they be literary, mathematic, artistic, musical, dramatical, scientific, or sporting - distinguish certain individuals from their contemporaries. So why is it important to attempt a definition? There are three specific reasons:

1. It provides the base for further discussions and actions in the organisation of gifted programming.

2. It demonstrates the philosophical focus of the educational programme.

3. It determines the direction to be taken in identification procedures.

In order to determine giftedness the child's past records, attitudes motivation, and health history must be thoroughly evaluated. Specific tests, including individual IQ tests and the application of a checklist of characteristics of very able pupils may be applied. Such a checklist would include the following:

Learning Motivational Characteristics

1. Has usually advanced vocabulary for age or grade level; uses terms in a meaningful way; has verbal behaviour characterised by "richness" of expression, elaborate constructions, and fluency.

2. Possesses extensive general knowledge, often knows more than the teacher and finds the usual reference books superficial.

3. Has quick mastery and recall of information.

4. Shows good insight into cause/effect relationships.

5. Easily grasps underlying principles and needs the minimum of explanation.

6. Quickly makes generalisations; can extract relevant points from complexity.

7. Often sees unusual, rather than conventional relationships.

8. Leaps from concrete examples to abstract rules and general principles.

9. Is a keen and alert observer, notes detail and is quick to see similarities and differences.

10. When interested becomes absorbed for long periods, and may be impatient with interference or abrupt change.

11. Is persistent in seeking task completion; often sets very high personal standards.

12. Is interested in many "adult" problems, such as religion, politics, justice, sex, race - more than usual for age level.

Creativity/Leadership Characteristics

1. Displays a great deal of curiosity about many things; is constantly asking questions about anything and everything.

2. Generates a large number of ideas or solutions to problems and questions.

3. Is uninhibited in expressions of opinions.

4. Is a high risk taker.

5. Manipulates ideas; fantasises, imagines.

6. Displays a keen sense of humour and sees humour in situations that may not appear humorous to others.

7. Shows emotional sensitivity; is appreciative of beauty.

8. Is self-confident with children his/her own age as well as adults.

9. Adapts readily to new situations; is flexible in thought and action.

10. Tends to dominate others when they are around; generally directs the activity in which he/she is involved.

11. Participates in most social activities connected with the school; can be counted on to be there.

12. Is well co-ordinated.

(Renzulli & Hartman, 1971)

As Joseph S. Renzulli (1978) pointed out, giftedness involves task commitment, above-average ability and creativity. If we accept that as a guide to educational provision, then it becomes a matter of governmental policy to develop a course of action. This includes monetary support for a number of gifted programmes. This paper will give consideration to aspects of programmes available in Australia for the gifted child and whether they are far-reaching enough. One might say, however, at this stage, that gifted education has now evolved to the point at which it is necessary to systematically plan and organise programmes within our educational institutions that will adequately provide those appropriate and intellectually stimulating experiences. The belief in egalitarianism or the concept of equal rights for all has led many educationists to the belief that all individuals are entitled to receive an education commensurate with their abilities and needs. In Australia, however, the stage has not been reached where gifted education has developed as a more specialised area of study within education. Unlike the United States of America where the the Marland Report (1972) laid the groundwork for increased federal support for the development of gifted programmes, there has been no equivalent development in Australia. There are, for example, very few teacher educator courses for specialisation in the gifted. A national survey of special education courses in Australian tertiary insitutions was carried out in

1983. The questionnaire, distributed by post, was based on four areas which are considered to represent the major divisions of exceptionality within special education. They are:

1. Migrant children
2. Mentally and/or physically handicapped children
3. Socio-economically and/or other learning-disabled children
4. Gifted and talented children

Each tertiary institution surveyed was requested to provide information detailing:

a) the exact number of courses offered in each area of exceptionality
b) the educational level at which the course was offered
c) the type and status of the course
d) the compulsory or elective nature of each course
e) the duration of each course

The results showed that three of the four areas of exceptionality each had approximately 30% of the total number of courses offered; Migrant Education = 26.28%, Mental/Physical Handicapped = 27.65%, Socio-Economic and Other Learning Disabilities = 33.8% but Gifted and Talented Children had only 10.98% of courses. The Gifted and Talented course, whilst having the lowest overall total, also showed variation within the states, with a low of 8.33% in Victoria and 9.44% in South Australia up to a high of 23.33% in Western Australia.

A particular problem noted as a result of the survey was that while educational policy in Australia generally supported the education of exceptional children within rather than outside the regular school system, the study of teacher-education courses in Australia indicated that student-teachers are least prepared with the skills necessary to cater for gifted and talented children. Where reference is made to the gifted and talented in pre-service courses it is usually confined to a single lecture in a general course rather than as a course in its own right. The result is, therefore, inadequate preparation of teachers in this area and consequently an inadequate provision for the more-able child in the regular classroom.

From the data obtained in the study, it is noted that there are variations in provisions for gifted and talented children within Australia. For example, Western Australia has the strongest provision for Gifted and Talented children and this is reflected in the enlightened approach to the Gifted and Talented Children Programme Project Group. On the other hand, Victoria, despite the activities of the Gifted Children Task Force has the lower teacher-education provision for gifted and talented children and this reflects strong opposition to what is perhaps seen as an elitist form of education in that state.

The limited number of pre-service and post-service (either inservice or post-graduate studies) courses has severe ramifications when research findings as early as 1968 (Frederickson & Rothney) indicated that teaching results were most successful with gifted and talented children when pre-, in-, or post-service training focussed on the use of specific classroom practices and teachers were sympathetic to the special needs of their pupils. In the case of kindergarten teaching, for example, it was found that many kindergarten or pre-school centres lacked the capacity to provide special courses or classes for the gifted and that indeed those children were ready to be learning more advanced matter (Fox, 1971). The children who were probably neglected the most were those who were able to read proficiently before school entry.

Various studies have been undertaken to assess teachers' attitudes towards the gifted. A brief survey of those studies is included here. Jacobs (1972) developed a measure to determine whether teachers' attitudes were positive or negative. The attitude scale was administered to the staff of a private school for gifted children. The result was positive attitudes towards gifted pupils. Where the test was administered to teachers of first grade infants in a school district, the findings demonstrated more negative than positive attitudes towards the gifted. Their attitudes, in fact, indicated that at an early age, the gifted child was taught that his inquisitive behaviour was less acceptable than that of other children. Smidchens and Sellin (1976) also measured attitudes of 116 teachers who were being trained, towards the gifted. The results indicated the need for training in this area and for consultative services for aiding the gifted learner. Similar results were found by Torrance and Kaufman (1977) who again suggested special training for teachers who help the gifted. Torrance and Dauw (1966) had also found similar results and they suggested special training for teachers to help the gifted.

A more recent attitude survey was carried out in 1983 in Western Australia to assess the attitudes of teachers, students and parents in relation to the Education Department's invitation in 1980 of a secondary schools programme designed to provide more adequately for intellectually talented children. Each year, since the inauguration of the programme in 1981, about 300 students have been offered places in eight metropolitan Government secondary schools on the basis of identification as being in the top one-and-a-half per cent of the 20,000 Western Australian students entering secondary school. By 1983, the metropolitan Government secondary schools were offering classes in the Secondary Special Placement Programme (SSPP) to more than 750 students from Year 8 to Year 10 or Year 11/12, depending on the rate at which they have been able to accelerate through their secondary schooling.

To summarise the results of the attitudes' survey, the overall population gave an unequivocal agree/strongly agree response to the following items:

1. Educators have a responsibility to provide programmes which will help intellectually talented students to benefit themselves and society to the maximum of their potential.

2. Intellectually talented students should be allocated sufficient time, space and staff necessary to assist in the development of their outstanding ability.

3. Intellectually talented students' programmes relieve the frustration created when regular classes provide little opportunity for work of sufficient interest.

The majority of respondents (75%) also agreed/strongly agreed that intellectually talented students should be grouped together for the major academic subjects to provide interaction and productive co-operation. Respondents were equally strongly opposed to mainstream provision by the regular classroom teacher and to specialised instruction only during weekends or holidays. The universal rejection of provisions only during out-of-school hours was consistent with the expressed opinion that educators have a responsibility to provide opportunities for intellectually talented students with the normal school system. The majority of respondents (68%) also favoured accelerated learning as opposed to provision by enrichment as enhancing the challenge for intellectually talented students (Tuettmann & Jenkins).

A current survey and evaluation of attitudes of teachers and parents to giftedness and educational training and provisions within schools is being undertaken by Y. Larsson within the Sydney metropolitan area (see Appendix A).

Teacher attitudes are very important in the classroom situation. Invariably if their attitudes are negative then the gifted child experiences negative peer responses. Where both the peer and teacher attitudes tend to reflect negative feelings the gifted child's approach to learning and the school environment is affected. Here are some sample responses from children placed in such a situation.

> *"I am the loneliest person in the world because I should really be in the twenty-first century. I'm inventing things now but I have to wait until I'm grown up because no one will listen to me."* (John, aged 9 years)

> *"I have discovered that I am not as mad as I thought I was. A lot of people have the same opinions, thoughts and sense of humour as myself ... I prefer to work at my own pace. At school, I get fed up waiting for others to catch up ... people don't understand this ... At school I don't work to my full ability."* (Janet, aged 13)

> *"At school, I am constantly hindered by people who don't understand the lesson."* (Mark, aged 13) (Wallace, 1983)

If pupils' talents are not given recognition, and provision made for them many will become under-achievers. The characteristics of the under-achieving child may be summarised in a checklist which resulted from the profiles of 200 under-achieving pupils who had been referred by teachers and parents to educational psychologists who subsequently assessed the pupils as having exceptional potential. The underachiever may exhibit the following characteristics:

> Absorbed in a private world, often wasting time by just doing nothing or distracting other pupils.
>
> Impatient and critical, sometimes rude and insolent, finding difficulty in making relations with peers and teachers.
>
> Emotionally unstable, very prone to moodiness or bad temper, apparently easily frustrated and lacking in kindness towards others. Defensive but very astute in argument and self-justification.
>
> Able to manipulate others while not being personally committed or involved.
>
> Frequently abrasively humorous with an ironic perception of other people's weaknesses.

But, the under-achiever is also:

> Quick to learn new concepts and able to pose problems and to solve them ingeniously, especially those unrelated to school tasks or "academic" subjects.
>
> Able to ask provocative, searching questions and very aware of problems about people and life generally.

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Persevering when motivated, sometimes performing at a high level in one or two areas only, and particularly when the relationship with the teacher is very good.

Inventive in response to open-ended questions.

Philosophical and wise about everyday problems and common-sense issues.

(Vernon, 1977)

Parents have special expectations of the teachers of their gifted and talented children. Through a structured questionnaire it was found that parents were very perceptive about what went on in the school with respect to their children (Ehrlich, 1982). Areas of concern expressed by parents were:

1. Does the teacher recognise the children's ability or talent, and what does he or she do about it?

2. Are the children being taught to think clearly and logically?

3. Do the children have opportunitites to talk and share ideas with others of similar ability levels?

4. Does the teacher show a concern for the children's emotional, social, and psychological needs?

5. Do the teacher and school co-operate with the demand of special training for talent development, as in music and the performing arts?

6. Is there a plan for continuity of work in later grades for gifted children who are permitted to progress at their own pace?

(Ehrlich, 1982)

The gifted and talented child faces two major problem areas: *(1)* coping with special gifts in a society that does not appreciate and may in fact be hostile to intellectuals, and *(2)* dealing with emotional problems that may occur regarding the optimal use of the gifts or talents. In helping the child, parents need to reward achievement, show affection, trust and approval, and ensure that the goals they set are realistic. It is very important that parents, either consciously or unconsciously, do not impose their own hopes and aspirations on the child. But parents, together with teachers, can help the child realise his/her potential within a realistic set of expectation (Mori, 1983).

Provisions within schools usually fall within a specific organisational pattern. Consistent with school philosophy, choice could be made from the following forms:

Within the School and Within School/time

Integrated/mainstreamed with articulated programme all, or part, of the time.

Homogeneous programme for the gifted/talented all of the time (may be cross grading)

Special classes for part of the time using cross grading

Mini-school

Revolving door principle (i.e., specialised instruction on a particular topic)

Released time

Resource rooms

Extra classes for extra credit

Independent learning

Management systems, contracts

Mentor/tutor

Itinerant teacher

Parent or volunteer community resource

Team teaching

Advanced placements, early entry

Double grade promotion

Either Within or Outside School time

Cluster groups

Magnet school

Special schools

Off-campus enrolment

Within these organisational structures, students can be grouped in any of the following ways:

Ability setting

Multi-age grouping

Integrated/mainstreaming with articulated programme

Student pairing

Student/adult pairing

Independent study projects

Interest-based grouping

Early entrance and/or advnaced placement.

It is important to note, however, that while organisational patterns will not, of themselves, markedly improve the lot of gifted children, they can provide a structural basis upon which differentiated teaching and learning can be developed.

The basic key to curricula for the gifted and talented is that they should not be "more of the same", nor should they be differentiated only after the work that all children in the regular classroom are expected to complete is finished. Differentiated curricula can be provided within the regular curriculum or in separate curricula and may involve:

accelerated or advanced content
higher degree of complexity of content
introduction of content beyond the prescribed curriculum
student-selected content according to interest
working with abstract concepts in a content area
creating or generating something new
recognition that some students learn abstract concepts more quickly.

In the context of curriculum, consideration must be given to the many ways by which children learn and to the provision of differentiated learning experiences. Some of the learning experiences which gifted children find stimulating and challenging are: individual research and experimentation, individual reading and writing, discussion and debate, problem finding and problem solving, role playing, field trips, and futuristics (i.e., speculating about the future)(Lucher, 1983).

This paper concludes with a summation of educational provisions in the Australian context and suggest directions to be undertaken. To date, the most successful implementation of programmes for the gifted and talented has been Western Australia where the matter has been thoroughly researched and advice sought from overseas experts. Besides the provision of special academic programmes in selected secondary schools, the Education Department of Western Australia provides for talented students in the creative and performing arts. The secondary programmes flow from a related specialist - teacher programme operating in primary schools. The organisational structure and patterns appropriate to the exceptional needs of the target group will consist of school-based programmes from pre-primary through the early primary years; partial withdrawal programmes for the middle years, withdrawal programmes for the upper-primary years, and the special-placement with provision for accelerated progress in the secondary years (Atkinson, 1983). To assist teachers, the Gifted and Talented Children's Programme provides, since 1983, a group of Secondary Advisory Teachers in the major subject areas, headed by a Chief Co-ordinator. The Chief Co-ordinator included amongst his duties encouragement and development of liaison between schools within the programme to facilitate sharing and communication of in-school provisions and resources.

The Education Department of South Australia has since 1976 had an Adaptive Education programme applicable from Kindergarten to Year 12. The purpose has been to assist schools in adapting curriculum content, school and classroom organisation, and teaching methods to increase the scope and flexibility in the learning activities provided for all students. In 1978, the Director-General of Education issued a policy statement on the education of intellectually gifted children. Basically, that statement directed attention to provision within the regular classroom situation. This may include acceleration, enrichment and options in grouping children. However, it is perceived that special talents, such as music and languages, are best taught in special interest centres.

The Gifted Children's Task Force, established in 1977, has provided the main thrust for programmes in Victoria for intellectually able children. One of its projects was to initiate cluster group enrichment programmes for primary school children. But probably the most exciting development was the establishment of

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an acceleration programme at University High School. This began in 1981 with the aim of accelerating the education of successive groups of highly intelligent children to the extent that they complete their secondary schooling (normally six years) in four years. The first group of 30 students entered in 1981; in successive years 25 students were selected. The drop-out rate has been minimal which is an indication of the relative success of the programmes. Great care is taken for individual differences wherever possible, but mostly, the children move forward as a group. There is no social isolation with acceleration when it applies to the group situation. The children in the accelerated group generally give great emotional support to each other and this, in itself, is especially rewarding for the children, many of whom had no friends in their primary schools.

New South Wales was the only state to take the initiative in setting up Opportunity "C" classes (O.C.) for primary years five and six. This was in 1932 and was largely the result of the efforts of H.S. Wyndham and Dr C. R. McRae, Principal of Sydney Teachers' College. In recent years the number of O.C. classes has declined and those that remain are in middle class areas, particularly on the lower North Shore of Sydney. Their survival was a consequence of pressure from parents particularly the New South Wales Association for Gifted Children. But children in working class areas had no opportunity for identification and special programmes. Similarly, the continued survival of some selective high schools was a consequence of parental pressure on the Department of Education. However, some comprehensive high schools maintained strong academic courses and streamed classes. These were predominantly schools located in middle class suburbs (Larsson, 1981).

The preferred situation in New South Wales is what is known as the "extension programme model", a school-based approach and it is considered that this approach best suits the aims of education within the state, the desires of most educators, the desires of an increasing number of parents and the needs of a large education system with a widely scattered population. The advantage for schools is that it avoids any charge of elitism. In addition to school-based programmes, the New South Wales Department of Education, has implemented several approaches to coping with giftedness in schools. These approaches have been designed to assist teachers. Four examples are: inservice course on Identification of Talented Children, Catering for Talented Children in Primary Schools - a retraining course of four weeks for teachers, a kit of classroom materials for teaching talented children and a camping programme. The camping programme which originated in the Metropolitan West Region of Sydney for secondary students is designed to provide enrichment and extension activities, over a week, for students with special talents and to develop teacher skills, in working with talented students (McDonald, 1983). There are other aims, too, but these are probably the most important.

Neither Queensland nor Tasmania has formulated any specific policy guidelines although both Departments of Education have drawn attention to the needs of exceptional and talented students. The recommendation generally in those states is that schools provide programmes for these students within normal school hours, supplemented where necessary by the support services of resource teachers and, at the secondary level, subject specialists. Usually enrichment activities and withdrawal for short periods of time are the favoured methods used by schools, although individual teachers have introduced programmes for the gifted.

Despite the innovations of Western Australia and the success of the acceleration programme at University High School, Victoria, Australian attitudes to gifted education show a persistent ambivalence. The most widely held view of the Australian community is that there is no reason to provide specific educational services or programmes, within the state system, for gifted students as they are

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ones who gain most from the general comprehensive educational programme. Nevertheless, increasing recognition is being given to providing supplementary assistance, usually in the form of enrichment, and even more encouraging is the view that "accelerated progression" be accepted as an option. But perhaps the most important statement of all made at a national seminar on curriculum for gifted and talented children (Brisbane, 1983) was the recognition given to the aim "to seek to develop a community awareness of the needs of outstanding children and to embark on a long-term project of changing community attitudes to excellence in most fields of endeavour" (Curriculum Seminar, 1983, p 3).

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